



# American Cause

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The Honorable George Murphy, Director

Special Report  
September 1976

## A Tree at Panmunjom

**Some observations on the sinister circumstances bearing on the axe-murder in August of our two American officers on the Korean truce line, and its larger meaning for Americans who may have forgotten why we are still there.**

by James Angleton and C.J.V. Murphy

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In the whole sorry sequence of recent American failures to cope with communist challenges in Africa and Asia, no single event has given more serious cause for concern over the Government's capacity for effective action than its singularly evasive response to the axe-murder in midsummer of two young American Army officers by North Korean troops on the truce line at Panmunjom.

The offense itself was certainly plain enough in its elementary brutality. A mixed work party of South Korean and American officers and men entered the so-called "Demilitarized Zone," better known these past 23 years by its acronym, DMZ, on the innocent chore of pruning an intrinsically valueless poplar tree, the branches of which were conveniently obscuring the view of the communist line from a watchtower on the United Nations' side. For no apparent reason, other than to humiliate the United States Army, a larger body of North Korean soldiers fell upon the work force and bludgeoned the two officers to death with axes wrested from their own men. President Ford rightly charged the communists with having perpetrated "vicious and unprovoked murder" in an attack both "brutal and cowardly." But in their hasty settlement of accounts with the perpetrators of the outrage, the terms devised by him and Secretary of State Kissinger are likely to be celebrated in the history of our times much more for their ingenuity than for their moral character.

### Murderers Not Punished

Instead of insisting that the murderers be punished, the command decision was to punish the tree itself. The mute, unoffending poplar that had offered welcome shade to travellers on the old road that runs from Kaesong to Seoul was struck down. It was annihilated, root and branch.

It's a long way, as human experience is measured, from the Garden of Eden to the rude compound of Quonset huts and wooden shacks that form

our highly placed public servants in Washington conducted themselves in the test of character raised by the grisly incident under the poplar is an uncomfortable reminder that ordinary men are still far from ever achieving the state of eternal grace that Adam lost for us in an earlier arboreal incident.

Adam, we know, failed a test of character under a fruit tree in the Garden of Eden. In their own hour of testing under the poplar at Panmunjom, the relatively small but extremely influential body of politicians, scholars, lawyers, executives, bureaucrats and technipols\* inside the National Security Council who as the Washington Special Action Group advise the President in crisis situations showed themselves, under circumstances far less seductive, to be no nobler than the unfortunate Adam. Instead of grappling with evil, they feasted on the drugged fruit of detente. They took out their frustrations on the poplar, rather than exact satisfaction and respect from a bold enemy.

### O! Woodman, Do Not Spare that Tree

In the humiliating aftermath, the rest of us Americans would do well to reflect long and hard on the implications attaching to that challenge at far-off Panmunjom. There's a saying that people are sometimes unable to see the forest for the trees. What that gentle aphorism argues is that some of us can usually be depended upon to lose sight of a main issue because we let ourselves be diverted by the minor pieces. But in the confusion and doubt that now prevail in the American attitude toward our responsibilities, risks and true interests abroad, a thoughtful assessment of the circumstances that brought on that bloody swirl of aggression at Panmunjom may give us a clearer comprehension of the forest of trouble and vexation that meets our gaze in Pacific Asia, on the horn of Africa, in the Indian Ocean and on the approaches to the Persian Gulf. Understanding what happened over the tree may, in other words, enable us better to judge what's going on in the forest itself.

How mixed up we really are is indicated by a poll of American opinions on current defense and foreign policy matters taken

\*Technicians, such as political, physical and social scientists, who conduct themselves as politicians, thereby achieving more influence and a

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by the Gallup Organization of Princeton for Potomac Associates, a liberal political research group recently settled in Washington, D.C. The results were published in *Foreign Policy*, another liberal quarterly, also based in the capital. They show that most Americans no longer expect much to be gained by our seeking closer relations with the Soviet Union and so have lost confidence in the magic of detente. Most Americans are also dubious about the wisdom of wasting too much effort on trying to improve our relations with communist China. Instead, they favor staying close to our present allies, seeing to it that American rights are treated with "respect" by other nations, and (rating 81 on a scale of 100) "keeping our military and defense forces strong." More than half—52 percent, in fact—believe that we should set about becoming "the world's most powerful nation." The bewildering aspect of these findings is that strong as was the feeling about the necessity for a powerful defense establishment, as an issue of urgent concern it was rated behind ten other national problems, all of a domestic nature, all of a materialistic interest.

Still, this peculiar anomaly in the American scale of values is not really as baffling as at first it may seem. Most of us find it all but impossible to make much sense of the arithmetic that goes into those awesome tables citing the ranges, the throwweights, the number of MIRVs associated with the strategic missile systems now drawn up on the two sides. Even more incomprehensible are the esoteric factors which will eventually determine the relative weights which the emerging Soviet supersonic Backfire, the American Cruise Missile, the controversial B-1 bomber and the huge and costly Trident submarine will each in its turn contribute to one side or the other of the military balance. These are all immensely complicated weapon systems that operate in the ocean depths, or in upper space, or are based far back in the hinterlands, and so are but rarely seen by the populace they are meant to defend.

Because so much of the new military technologies are over our heads, Secretary Kissinger can count on applause and cheers when he assures the rest of us, as he did in Phoenix in April, that we have no cause to "delude ourselves with fairy tales of America being second best." And that same month at Bossier City, in Louisiana, President Ford could promise, as indeed he did, that "as long as I hold this honored office I intend to see to it that the United States will never become second to anybody. Period."

That was officeseeking rhetoric. The President could not in truth supply a truly resounding, a wholly convincing period to his pledge. How far the balance has tilted against us, and in precisely which decisive elements of power, are matters that hover obscurely in the many imponderables affecting the weaponry and politics involved in the SALT process, beyond question the most confusing of all the urgent matters before us. The weapons being bargained over in the murky diplomacy of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks have never been tried in war. No one really knows how precisely they can be controlled in a battle situation, or how they can best be foiled or countered. And at this stage our planners can only hypothesize just how our communist enemies intend to fit their ever-enlarging panoply of mass destruction weaponry alongside their huge conventional military establishments, and how it is all to be used in their broad strategy for isolating and diminishing the United States.

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all these technical factors in order to form some reasonable idea of how we stand. The manner in which our communist adversaries conduct themselves toward us at various pressure points around the globe provides a set of measures for judging their intentions toward us and, even more, their confidence in being able to bring off whatever enterprise they may have in the making. That is a good reason for taking a close look at what happened at Panmunjom. That tree may tell us something important about the forest.

#### How President Eisenhower Stabilized the Line

We had best begin by refreshing our knowledge of how the truce line came to be fixed in the first place. When General Eisenhower entered the White House in January 1953, a provisional truce had been in force on the Korean battlefield for a year and a half. The armies faced each other across a zigzag line that ran across the waist of Korea a bit north, for the most part, of the 38th Parallel, the original partition boundary. In the Truman years, the war, which that decent man had carelessly described as "a police action," had cost 31,000 American dead, 91,000 wounded and some 13,000 missing who proved to be mostly dead. Throughout the exhausting haggle of the truce, the North Koreans and the far stronger Red Chinese forces in the line never stopped trying to improve their positions and to wear down American will. They did this by staging an interminable series of fierce local clashes that did not materially affect the main dispositions but did have the useful political effect of presenting the American people with an ever lengthening list of casualties.

Eisenhower's decision was the sensible one of a soldier turned President. It was to force the communist powers—the North Koreans, along with their Soviet and Chinese patrons—to bow to a formal armistice forthwith or face a dramatic enlargement of the war. He sent a fairly explicit warning through the Indian Government and various other channels that unless the fighting was stopped, he was prepared to break open the "sanctuary" in Manchuria from which the communist powers had supplied their field forces and to carry the war to whatever ports, air bases, railway systems and industrial areas in China and Manchuria that were supporting the communist armies. He warned, too, that the United States would no longer be self-constrained in having resort to tactical nuclear weapons, if that was a quick way to end the war. And to show that the threat was not a hollow one, he ordered two first-class Army divisions in Japan and a Marine division in reserve to be prepared for rapid deployment in Korea. A nuclear bomb wing was moved into the western Pacific.

That was the last clear-cut decision by an American president in a make-or-break political-military situation. Kennedy's blockade of Cuba in 1962 after the Soviet missiles were discovered there was not of the same soul-trying order of magnitude. Only a relative handful of Soviet troops had been risked in Cuba. The missiles themselves were not even operational. Eisenhower's decision, had he been obliged to execute it, would have put the United States in head-on collision with the Soviet Union and Red China, then locked together in fraternal alliance.

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It was no bluff. Eisenhower was in dead earnest. The Russians had threatened to supply the North Koreans and unleashed them in June 1950, when Soviet intelligence, sup-

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ported by the British-trained British Press who were then liaison officials in Washington, mistakenly concluded that the Americans no longer felt bound to honor the UN pledge to maintain the independence of South Korea. Then, as the North Koreans were reeling back to the Yalu River in defeat at the onset of the first winter, he persuaded Chairman Mao Tse-tung to launch the Red army south from Manchuria, with the object of turning the tide of battle and driving the United States from the rim of Asia. Then, at the start of the second summer, in June 1951, with the Chinese in their turn falling back in defeat to the old UN line, the Russians deftly re-entered the situation and rescued the Chinese armies by engineering a cease-fire that allowed them to hold where they stood. And, finally, as the fourth summer wore on, with Stalin now dead, a formidable soldier strategist in the White House and the American military buildup in full swing, the Russians and the Chinese concluded they had not only lost the war but also any hope of retrieving the loss by undermining the American will to persevere.

On July 27, 1953, six months after Eisenhower took office, the Armistice was signed at Panmunjom. It established a No Man's zone two and a half miles wide and 151 miles long that extends from the Yellow Sea to the Sea of Japan, ascending bitter mountains and coasting down steep and narrow valleys. The hope—a forlorn one, at best—was that eventually the dividing barrier of barbed wire would be dismantled and the Koreans on both sides would themselves reunite in independence under the UN's sheltering hand. Today, some 23 years later, a force of 41,000 Americans is still there, standing watch with a South Korean Army of 560,000. Facing them is the communist Marshal Kim Il Sung's first-class Army of at least 410,000 men, bountifully supported by Soviet-supplied air, artillery and tanks. The line at Panmunjom remains the most sensitive flashpoint of all the geography where United States and communist interests intersect.

#### Provocations Part of Soviet Strategy

It remains only because it serves the long-range strategy of Soviet-bloc policy to keep it so. The murder of the two officers is but the last of a continuing series of ambushes, bombings, snipings and assaults that have taken 49 American lives since the Armistice supposedly began. Add the casualties inflicted by the Koreans on each other, and the dead number more than 1,000. Eight years ago, six American soldiers were slain in an ambush near Panmunjom and last year an American major was all but beaten to death by North Korean guards at the truce site itself.

The August incident was of a piece with these provocations. A squad of 11 American and South Korean officers and men accompanied five South Korean tree-pruners to the poplar. As they made ready to proceed with the branch cutting, a group of North Korean guards came up and ordered them to desist. When the Americans stood their ground, a truck load of North Korean soldiers bore down upon them, and one of the officers was heard to shout an order to "kill." At the end of the melee, only minutes later, Captain Arthur G. Bonifas and Lieutenant Mark T. Barrett lay dead, their heads crushed by the blunt heads of the axes wrested from their workmen.

The survivors, five of whom were also stabbed or badly hurt, fell back. Reluctant to retaliate on his own, the American General in command notified our Embassy in Seoul and the Joint

Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon of the attack and waited for instructions.

They were two fretful days in coming from Vail, Colorado, where the President was vacationing. All they called for was exercising a handful of fighters and a few B-52s in formation within eyeshot of the communist delegation at Panmunjom, but cautiously and unprovocatively inside the South Korean frontier. They also called for sending another and bigger party of workmen back to the poplar with orders not just to prune it but to cut it down. The tree was felled, expeditiously, with power saws.

The North Koreans did not interfere this time. There was hardly reason for them to do so. They had already made their point. All that President-Marshal Kim Il Sung felt called upon to do by way of amends was to toss off a note which termed the first incident "regretful" but artfully implied that the Americans had brought it on themselves. The note was gingerly received by Dr. Kissinger who first deemed it "unsatisfactory" only to "flip-flop" (a term which has been sharply honed by the presidential speechwriters for use against Governor Carter) into the opposite conclusion a day later that American honor had somehow been required, in ways perceptible only to himself and, perhaps, President Ford.

#### United States a "Paper Tiger"

What was the point that President Kim Il Sung had made? It stands to reason that when his soldiers sallied forth to repel the tree-pruners, he was not seeking a *casus belli*. A big war with the United States is the last thing either the Soviet Union or communist China wants at this point in time. But neither was the attack the "looney" and "unpremeditated" action which some apologists such as the CBS man Kalb would have us believe. The point that the North Koreans were out to make under the poplar was the same one they seek to drive home whenever they goad, harass, or waylay an American patrol. It is the one that was in their minds eight years ago when they crippled and boarded the *Pueblo* in international waters. Their point is to demonstrate to our allies and third-world countries that the United States is losing the moral fortitude for struggle. It can be chivvied into slipping out from under its world commitments. It is becoming the "paper tiger" that Mao Tse-tung once said it was, a judgment reinforced at his own bier by the kow-towing not only by the President but also by a cortege led by a former Secretary of Defense who was fired by the President himself.

There is no mystery about the long-term objectives which Kim Il Sung shares with his Moscow suppliers and with his fellow Asians and war comrades in Peking. It is to finish the task of driving the United States off its last remaining stronghold on the Asian mainland that was begun under Soviet-Chinese auspices 16 years ago.

Three years ago, the negotiations that were proclaimed to produce the "peaceful reunification" of the Korean peninsula broke down. Since then the North Koreans have concentrated on further enlarging their already huge military establishments. The Russians have supplied them with more tanks and aircraft than we have given the South Koreans. They have added greatly to the many artillery battalions deployed behind the truce zone. The Russians have further strengthened them with missiles capable of striking Seoul from forward positions. And what is even more ominous as regards the ability of the South Koreans to arrest another invasion, the North Koreans have

been busy as moles driving tunnels under the DMZ. The South Koreans have already uncovered two that are wide and high enough to pass trucks and tanks and even deliver a division of infantry behind their forward positions in an hour or two. From intelligence sources, it has been determined that as many as 12 such tunnels have been dug. This massive effort underlines the communist intent and determination to wipe the slate clean of the remaining American presence in Asia and it further reminds us of the high value which communist strategy places on surprise.

### The Difficult Question of Self-Interest

Why are we Americans still in that distant, dangerous place? Communist propaganda and our liberal-left journalism would have the rest of the world believe—and unfortunately, too many Americans as well—that it is only to maintain the less-than-democratic regime of President Park Chung Hee and to cling to the remnants of imperialism. In truth, we remain in Korea because of the acute vulnerability of an unarmed, still largely pacifist Japan, now recently awakened by two events to the need for applying its own mind to its peril: The shattering revelations leaked by Senator Church, defeated in his own ambitions, and by the stalwart Soviet pilot, who sought sanctuary and freedom in a democratic Japan exposed to predatory communism. We fought there in 1950 primarily to keep that talented and industrious society from passing in its helplessness under the hegemony of either communist China or the Soviet Union.

The pity is that too few among us remember that it is the promise to protect a Japan which we defeated and disarmed three decades ago that binds us to the defense of South Korea. A reality governs our presence there that the incalculably influential organs of our journalism—the networks, *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the liberal weedies—have deliberately ignored in their obsession with the alleged inequities of President Park. The attack which they have lately and simultaneously mounted on him is almost identical in its rationale with the ones these same organs used to bring down President Thieu in Vietnam and are now contriving for the downfall of the Shah of Iran. If we intend to maintain a working position on the western Pacific, the United States cannot back out of Korea merely because a mischief-making handful of liberal-leftist journalists do not like the way Park governs. A pull-out would leave Japan naked and the islands of the western Pacific—the Philippines, Okinawa, eventually even Australia—as strategic counters to be swept up by the ascendant power.

### Self-Interest and Political Morality

The hard lesson that we should have learned from the American experience in the Cold War is that to draw a line in strategy and foreign policy which attempts to take in both self-interest and political morality can't help but be tortuous and a slithering exercise. As *The Economist* of London pointed out in a characteristically well-reasoned leader in its issue of 28 August, if self-interest is now to govern American strategy Israel would

wholly be eliminated as an object of policy. So would Europe, for that matter. Indeed, by that standard, only the energy-yielding kingdoms of the Persian Gulf would be absolutely indispensable to American action, and none of them qualifies as a model of democratic pluralism.

How is either self-interest or morality to be served by "normalizing" relations with the Peking communists (who have little to exchange with us of practical value) if the process is to be at the expense of our pledge to defend Taiwan, a stout ally and a fruitful and fair trade partner to boot? Where is either self-interest or morality, let alone wisdom, to be found in an African policy that is prepared to sacrifice the material and political rights of white minorities in Africa to blacks after the squalid events in Uganda, Kenya and Angola have shown that black majorities, once in power, sweep minorities, including Indians, aside?

And, finally, do their people really have sound legal grounds for their pitiless attack on the Park government? Seoul, Korea is in a state of war. It is surrounded North and West by enemies. To suspend a few rights, as it has done, is not unnatural for democratic societies in similar peril. In fact, Israel has done so because it, too, is in peril. In fact, given the pathetic American performance at Panmunjom, we could wish that our leaders had drawn upon the same moral design that inspired Prime Minister Rabin to redeem Israel honor at Entebbe.

### A House of Many Mansions

Equal with the oil, natural resources, and the political elements are the intangibles—the worth of stout-minded and independent societies ready to help Americans and their allies hold a crucial line; friends who will stand alongside us in defense of the vital moral interest. In the real world the only sensible system of alliance is one that is itself a house of many mansions. That was what the containment policy started out to be.

Everywhere the lines are shortening. The weakness of the United States is essentially an inner one. Americans of the liberal left, especially in politics and journalism, are more passionately devoted to confounding the American public than in facing up to the communist threat. For them, the real enemy in Korea is our ally, a stubborn President Park who must be responsive to the perils of his nation. In their view, executing the tree at Panmunjom was a safe way out of a bad situation in which no one in authority wanted to consult our immediate self-interest, let alone our moral responsibility to the tenets of the nation.

We have a proposal for honoring the trophies from that inglorious action. If it has not been done already, let the logs of the poplar be flown in Air Force One back home and racked alongside the fireplace in the Secretary of State's Reception Room at Foggy Bottom. There, when he delights himself in *tete-a-tete* confidences with envoys from the other camp, the men of detente can warm their hands, if not their souls, over the dying embers of what only 23 years ago was the American and Korean sacrifice for Panmunjom.